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Freedom Bound

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Abstract

Jean concentrated on the irregular wooden railroad planks. Sometimes she could take in two in a long stride, sometimes three. It made her mind whirl after a while to watch those planks fly under her feet...

Home Economics *food!* And coffee in the damn percolator. And *orange juice* every goddam morning for the rest of my life!

And, dear sweet Boeotian mine, light. All over the place. Light. No naked lightbulbs hanging off the ceiling. Lamps. *Hundreds* of goddam lamps. With blue and blond lampshades. All chasing out the goddam unhealthy dim.

And, if you've got the delusional fog out of your baby-blue eyes by now, you *may* just notice, on your way out, that cellar apartments in lower west Manhattan *do* sometimes have adequate lavatories.

Now will you please just pack up your infantile accusations and go home to Mama? Please?

I have work to do.

No.

Wait! I'm sorry, really.

Cup of coffee? Thanks, Charlie. Old blockhead.

Freedom Bound

by June Webrman

Bact., Sr.

JEAN concentrated on the irregular wooden railroad planks. Sometimes she could take in two in a long stride, sometimes three. It made her mind whirl after a while to watch those planks fly under her feet. She counted how many planks there were between telephone poles, how many telephone poles until the top of the next hill, how many hills since the last pond. It helped to pass the time and it helped to keep her mind occupied so she wouldn't get mad again. She got mad everytime she thought about it so she tried not to think about it. Every so often she knelt down beside the track and put her ear on a steel rail to listen for the train. She knew it wouldn't be too much longer. Considering how often they passed through Rapid City, it couldn't be too much longer.

"Darn you, Tim. Why did you have to come along. What

are you going to do when I get on. You dumb dog. You'll get lost, that's what you'll do. Somebody'll pick you up and read your tag and take you back to Dad, then he'll know which way I went. Darn you."

The brown cocker looked up at her with his big brown eyes but didn't wag his stubby tail.

"And don't look at ME like *that*. Innocent my foot. I TOLD you not to come. I told you. Now you can get just as tired as I do. And just as hungry. Are ya hungry ole dawg? HMM?"

The dog started wagging his tail again and rushed around sniffing at bushes, digging out holes in the dirt to bark in them, and hunting for snakes or rabbits.

Jean pulled off her sweatshirt and tied it around her waist. Her short brown hair fluffed in the wind. Her sturdy, well-built form was carried by long legs. She marveled at how crazy the South Dakota weather was—how it could be freezing in the morning and then be uncomfortably warm before 11 A.M. She saw Tim's tongue hang out and saliva drool from it, his sides heaving. She knew that the evening would be cold—much too cold for a sweatshirt—but she didn't want to carry a heavy coat with her all day, and besides she would soon be on the train. She had taken off right after her folks had left for work. That last argument with Laura was the limit. As soon as they had left, she grabbed her fifteen dollars, distributed it evenly in her shoes, and ran out. That was at 8 A.M.

And now, for three hours she and Tim had been walking and already her leg muscles were beginning to stiffen and ache. She ran when she could but found she could go farther with less wasted energy when she just kept walking steadily.

About every half mile there was an open place under the tracks, probably to help water drainage in the spring. But this was summer so the bare places under the tracks were dry and afforded a shady resting place. Jean crawled under the tracks and sat in the coolness whenever she felt she could afford the time. She never rested for very long. She wasn't far enough from Rapid yet—and her folks. She'd never be too far away from her folks to suit her. She leaned back on her elbows and looked up at the greasy rails above. At least

when she reached Chicago, her father and stepmother wouldn't be able to find her. Gritting her teeth she tore up patches of weeds and threw them. Her squinted eyes smoldered fury and her fingernails dug into her palms.

"OOoooh, they make me sick. Laura and all of her damned notes. 'Do this—Do that—Don't do it like that—do it the way I showed you.'" What does SHE know about housework . . . she's never home. All she knows is how to run a stenograph. Blackmail. That's all she does to me, blackmail. Anything she knows that I want to do she holds it over my head and gets me to do what she wants. God! Can't even have my hair cut where I like to have it cut—got to have it cut where SHE goes. 'No, you can't learn to drive the car till you remember to brush your teeth.' 'If you don't stop arguing with me you can't have Mary come over tomorrow.' "

She picked up a rock and threw it hard.

"And my stupid dad. All HE can do is agree with her against me except when he's drunk and beating up on her. He never wanted a girl. I know he didn't. It sticks out all over. Jean Francis . . . what a name for a girl. Teaching me how to fight and here I am a tomboy . . . too tough for the girls and too rough for the boys. I sure wish I had a brother or a sister. Maybe Dad would have let me be a girl then. OOOOOOOoooooh I hate them. I hate them. I hate them."

Her anger was checked by the sound of Tim splashing in the pond. It was quite a large pond. She had noticed it just before she had crawled under the tracks. Now she poked her head out and saw Tim swimming in sheer ecstasy in the cool water. She crawled out and walked down the side of the railroad hill to the pond. A huge pipe came through the hill and emptied into the pond from a height of about three feet but it was dry now and Jean took off her tennis shoes and, sitting on the bottom of the pipe, she splashed her feet. The water felt wonderful on her burning feet. Cattails and reeds jutted up around the edge and were resting spots for dragonflies. Across the pond was a barbed wire fence and behind that stood a column of birch and aspen trees. No houses, cattle, or people were to be seen and, from where she sat with the railroad hill behind her, she realized she was in solitude.

"Tim, darn you. You're making me jealous." She untied

her sweatshirt, stripped to her underwear and eased into the pond. It came to her waist and had a faint, pungent odor of decay but it wasn't stagnant. Oozy mud squished around her toes as she probed the bottom for sharp cattail stubs. The pond slowly deepened and soon she was swimming. Tim started to follow but when she kept pushing water spray on him, he turned back.

Laughing, she yelled after him, "You're a yellow chicken, you brown dog." She swam for five minutes in the deepest part of the pond and chuckled to herself. "Boy, wouldn't Laura croak if she would see me now?! Man, oh, man. She'd have kittens. All she can do is read about things. She'd never have guts enough to actually get out and *do* anything. She has to see an action in *PRINT* before she'll . . ." Jean's thoughts suddenly were blotted out by a low thundering. "Oh, damn," she thought. "Now now." She swam back to the culvert as fast as she could and started drying off with her sweatshirt. Tim shook his body and the spray undid most of her efforts at drying. The low, precise hum of the train announced its swift approach.

From furiously drying and dressing, she slowed her actions and stood up straight. "That's a passenger train you knothead. You could never catch that." Dressed for the most part, she commanded, "Tim, come here!" Tim came to the side of the culvert and Jean held on to his collar firmly. The California Zephyr shot past above them, clean-cut and efficient.

"Well, that shoots that in the head." She let go of the dog. "God, there's got to be a freight train along here soon. I'll have to get situated on a hill where it has to slow down. Come on, Tim."

On the tracks they started out again—hungry and stiff but refreshed. Again she counted wooden planks flitting beneath her feet, the telephone poles, the hills. Tim pattered along the rail, sniffing in and out but without quite as much enthusiasm as before. She passed stacks of hay and several farm houses. Once in a while she saw people at a distance watching her but she ignored them and looked self confident. She wished she could go and ask at one of those houses for something to eat but knew it would never work . . . not with her being a girl, and sixteen and all. She wondered if her folks had called the police yet. She could hear them coming

home for lunch. First Laura would cuss her out for not having the housework done and dinner ready, then they'd both cuss her out for not being there or leaving a note saying where she had gone. They'd get their own lunch and go back to work. Then they'd be calling home all afternoon to see when she would come in just like they did all day long to see if she had gotten such and such done yet.

"I wonder just how long it'll take them to realize I've run away for good. They'll miss the house not being cleaned up more than they'll miss me. I wouldn't be surprised if they put in the paper, "Maid Missing from Thompson Home!"

The time wore on slowly. At 4 P.M. she was a good fifteen miles from Rapid but she ached as though she had walked fifty. At least the air was getting a little cooler now.

Just before 7 P.M. she found the spot she had been looking for—a clump of trees on a hill. The trees bordered a small creek which ran under the tracks and the tracks were on an upgrade. The water in the creek trickled contentedly over the stones and it looked almost clean. Tim was already walking around in the water and lapping with his pink tongue. Famished, exhausted, and thirsty, Jean walked upstream from Tim and quenched her thirst. Then, filled to fullness with water, she collapsed on a large rock. Gazing at the trees she noticed that there was one next to the track that was perfect for climbing. Its first branch was low and the next branch went straight out like an arm. She usually liked willow trees best to climb—but this one filled the bill nicely.

She walked over to the tree and soon was on her destined branch. It was even a nicer perch than she had expected. The trunk cradled her back and the limbs were sturdy and wide. Also there was a young branch above her head she could hang onto with one arm. It was the perfect place. Tim stretched out on the ground below her as he always did when he was too tired to hunt.

The effects of hard walking began to add and multiply. Oh, how she ached. The pangs of hunger returned in full force. Her head was dizzy from walking in the hot sun all day and from drinking too much water on an empty stomach. She grasped the overhead limb tightly and laid her head on her arm.

At 7:30 P.M. the freight train came. She hadn't even heard it coming. It lumbered past with cows mooing. It slowed down a little just like she had anticipated but she was much too stiff to climb down fast and run after it now. She leaned back on her arm, moaned, and let the train pass. It left its scents of smoke and cow which only chagrined her drenched hopes of escape. She leaned back despairingly—hunger pains gnawing, muscles aching.

For a long time she stared into the sky. Tim whined. She looked down at him and tears rolled from her cheeks. She shivered intermittently and the involuntary reflex made her even weaker than before. She watched the sun send its purple, pink and red streaks across the clouds. She was free. She could enjoy. She was alive. For a whole day she had been fully alive.

She watched the brilliant disk sink behind the trees. Evening came quickly and its accompanying coldness sank heavily to the ground. Chills were added to the numerous influences already draining her taxed body. Still she waited. It seemed so strange that only two trains had come past. Sighing, she wondered why she hadn't chosen one of the other tracks which forked off of the one she had followed all day. She still strained her eyes and ears for a flashing light or welcome sound.

Finally, she climbed down from the tree. Slowly she crossed the tracks and searched again for a train from Rapid. Oblivious to the dog close by her side, she said sadly, "Come on, Tim. I guess you and I have got to go find a telephone." The two companions cut across the field and headed toward a faint square of yellow light. Soon, oh, too soon she would be in her parents' car.

